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ABSTRACT

A new field of study within the discipline of geography is proposed: the geography of the Bible. In a general sense, this new field can be justified by recognizing the relationships between religion and environment. Specifically in terms of the Bible, there are evidences of geographic factors affecting the writing of the Bible. Also, there are evidences of the effects of the Bible on the life of the people and countries of the "Bible Land." Courses on the historical geography of the Holy Land have been offered in seminaries for decades, but now it seems appropriate to introduce the topic into academic courses. Geographers can be concerned with at least three academic areas within the topic. First, the Bible contains many passages with geographic implications which average readers may not readily understand ("Lo, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone...Song of Solomon 2:11). Geographers could apply geographic knowledge and principles to elucidate such passages. Second, the Bible has for its background not only a people but also a geographic region. Geographers could investigate the regional aspects of the Bible Land from a temporal-spatial perspective as it has been transformed over the ages. Third, geographers could relate current problems in the Middle East to conflicts which occurred during and after the events described in the Bible. (AV)

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GEOGRAPHY OF THE BIBLE

AS AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT IN GEOGRAPHY

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for
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GEOGRAPHY AND THE BIBLE

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GEOGRAPHY OF THE BIBLE

AS AN ACADEMIC SUEJECT IN GEOGRAPHY

Jonathan J. Lu

GEOGRAPHY AND THE BIBLE

Geography, γεω γραφή, to the ancient Greeks, was the describing of the earth. "Geographers" in those days, were engaged not only in recounting different parts of the known world, but also in recording various phenomena that had anything to do with the earth. Thus, Geography was a field that dealt with everything under the sun, and indeed, it has been known as the mother of modern sciences.[1]

The nature and method of Geography have long since been changed from that of purely descriptive to that of analysis of dynamic relationships. Yet the scope of Geography remains pretty much the same--synthesis of everything under the sun.[2] Indeed, geographers today are no less ingenious than their predecessors. Not only have they branches of geography to match every subject in the systematic sciences and humanities, but they also teach courses ranging from Data Processing to Problem Solving, from Natural Habitats to Human Behavior, from Poverty to Zoning, and even on Cybernetics.[3]

But it is not because of this ingenuity that the Geography of the Bible is being proposed; rather, it is because there truly exist various relationships between these two fields: Geography and the Bible.

The Bible, to some, is a book or the Book; to many others, it is a set of doctrine, a set of religious beliefs which manifests itself specifically in the forms of worship, in the architectural style of church buildings as they dotted amidst the human landscape in a physical setting. The Bible,

thus, may be treated as a subset of religion, and it is, therefore, a legitimate subject in Geography, or specifically, Geography of Religion.[4]

Regarding the Geography of Religion, Paul Fickeler, a German free-lance scholar and writer, once said that the relations between religion and environment [geography] are mutual. The understanding of these relationships can be approached by asking two questions: (1) How does the environment, including the people, the landscape, and the country, affect a religious form? and, (2) How does a religious form affect a people, landscape, and country?[5]

These two questions are also applicable to the Geography of the Bible. For the relationships between the writing of the Bible and the geography of the "Bible Land" are mutual. On one hand, there are evidences of geographic factors and elements affecting the writing of the Bible; on the other hand, there are also evidences of the effects of the Bible on the life of the people, the landscape, and the countries of the "Bible Land."[6]

The Bible has two testaments: the Old and the New Testaments. The Old Testament is about a people, and the New Testament is about a person.[7] The people, began with the call of Abram out of Ur of Chaledea, followed by the sojourn of the Patriarch in the Land of Canaan, the migration of the Hebrews to Goshen, the propagation of "the twelve tribes" in the Nile Delta, the exodus of the "Children of Israel" from Egypt, the wondering of "the rebellious" in the midbars of Sinai, and the final entry of the "Chosen People" into the "Promised Land." In all of these, there existed an intricate relationship between the people and the lands in which they visited. This relationship is, in itself, very dear to the heart of the geographer.

The New Testament is centered around a person: Jesus of Nazareth. To Christians, Jesus is not an ordinary person: He is God Himself, the infinite,

omnipresent, who in due time, intervened in the human affairs with a "salvation" to save the perishing world. In order to do so, the omnipresent God chose to be captive of time and space, and thus became Emmanuel. Jesus, the Savior, was born in Bethlehem, escaped the onslaught of Herod the Great, exiled in Egypt, and was raised in Nazareth. He "went about doing good" in the Judean Hills, at the Samaritan well, on the Galilean shores, and in the lands beyond. He drew many examples for his teaching from the landscapes familiar to himself: not only lilies in the fields, birds in the air, animals in the wilderness; but also the back bending chores on the farms, and night toiling activities over the Sea of Galilee. His itineraries, the stopping places of his ministry have become an emotional attachment to many of his followers, and they later became "Holy Places." As one looks at these places, one cannot escape from being impressed by the <u>effect</u> of these New Testament events on the landscape and in the life of these people--a theme spoken of by Fickeler.

Furthermore, the Bible is the source and foundation of Judeo-Christian faith, a faith to which a large segment of our American society is adhering, and a faith with which an increasing number of world population is being identified. No wonder the Bible is the best seller and the most read book in North America, and it is the most-translated book in the world.[8]

Moreover, many of the national principles of the United States, established by our founding fathers, were derived directly from the Bible. And yet, in its seventy-four year history, the Association of American Geographers has never before presented to its members an opportunity to openly discuss such an important subject as the Geography of the Bible, not to mention the public in general. It is time for geographers to take the forefront in teaching and

researching this neglected academic subject which is geographers' legitimate custody.

THE HISTORY

The reason the phrase "to take the forefront" was used is because the subject being promoted is not brand new. The publication of The Historical Geography of the Holy Land by George Adam Smith in 1894[9] marked the first attempt to introduce the geography of the land in which the major part of the biblical events took place. Since then, the subject has been promoted and taught, traditionally, in seminaries and Bible colleges by biblical scholars who, though they may have visited "the Land," but by reasons of their background and training, have made little application of the geographic principles. Most of these biblical scholars have followed the traditional historical-descriptive approach to relate the biblical-historic events as they unveiled themselves on the geographic "stage" of Palestine.[10]

Professional geographers, on the other hand, have paid little attention to the subject until recently. Their seemingly "lack" of interest may be due to the inherent nature of the subject matter. In defending the charge by critics that "geographers do not want theology in a geography book,"[11] it is only fair to say that it takes a combination of interests in Geography, the Bible, and the opportunity to personally get acquainted with "the Land" to make a biblical geographer.

The recent interest in the subject by professional geographers may be traced to the publication in 1957, The Geography of the Bible: A Study in Historical Geography by Denis Baly, who has a unique background of being a trained geographer and Bible scholar. In addition, Baly served as a missionary-educator to Palestine under the British mandate, and has

extensively visited various parts of the biblical world on numerous occasions.

Professor Baly, currently Chairman of the Religion Department at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio is the first person to apply geographic principles to study the biblical events. He has more than lived up to the expectation of the privilege vested in him, by providing the profession with several volumes of monumental work in this field.[12] Thus, Professor Baly should be credited as "the forerunner" of modern biblical geography and indeed, to many in the profession, he is the living biblical geographer.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE BIBLE

But what is "the Geography of the Bible"? Baly was right in saying that a "study of the 'Land' which is merely superficial and rejects the discipline of examining how the whole environment is built, and a study of the 'Book' which does not take seriously the nature of the biblical argument, are both of them studies without integrity."[13] But Baly has never attempted to answer the question, what is the geography of the Bible, nor raised it. The question, nevertheless, is important and to answer this difficult question, one should perhaps first look into the nature of the subject matter.

The nature of the Geography of the Bible is unique. First, it is a subject that is based entirely on one book, the Bible, which, in its content, has included many of the geographic elements, factors, and principles; and which in its intent, also has a message for the entire human race who distributes itself over the surface of the earth. Second, in spite of its universal nature, the Bible has for its primary focus a "chosen people" who has in various ways, been tied to a geographic region which, though loosely defined as Canaan, Palestine, the "Promised Land," the Holy Land, and the

Bible Lands, is our primary regional concern. Third, as such, the Geography of the Bible, unlike other subjects in Geography, straddles both the systematic and regional branches of geography. As it will become clear later, the subject is neither purely systematic nor purely regional: it is both. Thus, for want of a better definition, the Geography of the Bible may be defined as "the 'geography' that is found (included) in the Bible."

Since the announcement for this Special Session on the Geography and the Bible, many letters of encouragement have been received. Not only is there an increasing interest in the subject, but also convincingly, more and more institutes of higher learning will be introducing courses related to the Bible and Geography in their regular curriculum in the days ahead. There arises, therefore, the need to tackle some of the philosophical questions concerning the nature and scope of the subject. There is also the necessity to consider the approaches, and the methodology to such a subject.

Nomenclature

But the first point to consider is the proper nomenclature. Is it appropriate to call the subject matter "the Geography of the Bible" (a term used by Baly), or "Geography and the Bible"? Or, should it be called "the Historical Geography of the Bible (Holy) Land"? Each of these terms mentioned suggests a slightly different focus and they vary in scope. By using the phrase "historical geography," the subject thus defines itself narrowly, although the scope of the "Bible Land" may be a bit wider than the "Holy Land." Historical Geography studies "the geography of the past."[14] Historical Geography of the Bible (Holy) Land, therefore, follows the standard approach and methodology as the Historical Geography of the Middle East or the Historical Geography of the United States,[15] and may be augmented

by archaeological findings.

The purpose of historical geography is to visualize what the cultural, economic, and political geography of the land might look like during the time of specific interest which, in turn, provides necessary background for a better understanding of the current geographic relations. Reciprocally, the present landscape, as well as the historical records and archaeological findings, all are important elements in reconstructing the past geography. This may concern the Holy Land as a whole in general, or a specific place in that land, say, Shechem in particular.[16] In the process, one not only tries to envision the past settlement pattern of Shechem: the physical characteristics of its site, and the changing situations that caused its rising to importance and decline. One also tries to envisage the life of its inhabitants: their cultural achievements, and their economic well-being, etc. All of these, however, must be interpreted in terms of biblical significances.

The personal preference, however, is for a broader coverage of the subject. For the relationship between the content of the Bible and the Geography lies beyond the limits of historical perspectives. The following elaborates this statement.

Geographic Allegories and Biblical Expressions.--The Bible was first revealed to the Hebrews by Jehovah God who "led" the "Children of Israel" to migrate and to settle in the "Promised Land." In order for the "Children" to easily understand this sacred scripture in the land whose geographic setting "is not like the land of Egypt" (Deut. 11:10), the Bible often allegorically uses local geographic phenomena to project or to bring forth certain truths or to symbolize certain facts of life.

These allegories, being drawn from backgrounds of local origin, often are not readily comprehensible by people living outside this region. For example, it is somewhat difficult for those who live in this part of the world to understand Job 6:15 which says, "My brethren have dealt deceitfully as a brook, and as the stream of brook they pass away." By studying the geographic background of the Bible Land and by expounding the geographic phenomena that are allegorically incorporated in the Bible, it brings to light some of the scriptural "riddles" as such and it helps one to appreciate other biblical expressions as, "Lo, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone . . ." (Song of Solomon 2:11).[17]

Biblical Truths and Geographic Facts.--Furthermore, the Bible also incorporated geographic facts (or phenomena) of universal truth. Many of these are well known to geographers, but often being taken for granted. These phenomena, however, are not always readily understandable to others. For example, average Bible readers surely know these geographic facts that are mentioned in Ecclesiastes 1:7 where it says, "All rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full;" but many of these readers probably do not know "what does this mean" or "how does it work" when the second half of that verse says, "Unto the places from whence the rivers come; thither they return again." By applying the geographic principles, geographers can help others to better understand and appreciate the meaning of this scripture. Other passages in the Bible with such nature may be found, for instance, in ". . . He hangeth the earth upon nothing" (Job 26:7), or ". . . thou . . . stretchest out the heavens like a curtain" (Psalms 104:2).[18]

What Are Included

A friend of the author in New York said to him, "You are promoting the

Geography of the Bible! What do you think of the current Sadat diplomacy and the situations in the Middle East? Do you think it is the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 19?" Now, Isaiah 19:23-24 says, "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, . . . In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.'" (RSV)

The Sadat diplomacy is interesting and exciting, although just how would a geographer interpret this particular event is not quite sure. Nevertheless, there are prophecies in the Bible to which strong geographical bases are apparent. The interpretation of these prophecies hopefully will not be left entirely to the theologians. Bible-believing geographers should pick up some of the responsibilities to study them in depth and to expound them with geographic principles.

In addition, there are at least three academic areas in the subject of the Geography of the Bible with which geographers should be concerned. First, as discussed earlier, the Bible has included in it many passages with geographic implications. These passages are not always readily understandable by average readers. We should, therefore, in our first area of academic concern take time to expound these passages by applying the geographic principles toward their better understanding. Examples of such passages as Job 6:15, Song of Solomon 2:11-14, Ecclesiastes 1:5-7, and Psalms 104:2 have already been mentioned. Passages of this like are abound in the Bible.

Second, the Bible has for its background not only a people but also a

geographic region--the "Bible Land." This Bible Land, like any other geographic regions, is constantly being transformed by various forces over the ages. Therefore, in the second area of our academic concern, we should investigate the regional aspects of this Bible Land from a temporal-spatial perspective.

Students currently enrolled in my Geography of the Bible class want to learn, among other things, a bit more about the places in which certain biblical events took place. This desire was satisfied by assignments of both to read pertinent materials and to do "search" projects on the places and/or regions of specific interest. But for a start, they were directed to begin with passages such as Genesis 10, Numbers 11, or Joshua 12 to 17. Students were advised to use various resources, including journals,[19] books, Bible dictionaries, commentaries, atlases, etc. The purpose was not only to gain knowledge, but also to acquire the skill of knowing how to search information for themselves. When this is accomplished, a sense of personal satisfaction is also being fostered. The process of this aspect of learning, of course, may also be supplemented by films, slides, and if possible, by a field trip to the Holy Land.

Third, because the "Promised Land" was not devoid of people before the arrival of the Hebrews and the "Home Land" was already occupied before the "return" of the Jews, clashes and conflicts, therefore, are not only unavoidable but also inevitable. Thus, a third area of our academic concern should be devoted to the understanding of the current and the abiding Middle East problems. In studying the Geography of the Bible, one should not just simply be seeking appreciations of Palestine as the "Holy Land"; but should try also to gain understanding to the intrinsic and the intricate problems

of the Arab-Israeli relationships.

If the philosophy of geopolitik has caused the world, especially this part of the world, so much problem, perhaps, it is time for geographers to advocate the principle of geopacifik. Geographers may not have a strong prophetic voice in linking specific Bible passages with current world events, they should have a proper voice in advocating the noble desire of "living in peace."[20]

A fourth area of our academic activity may be added here, and this is Cartography--the unquestionable tool and the unique privilege of the geographer. Interesting enough, most of the biblical atlases currently available were compiled by biblical scholars--not geographers! Here is another area in the Geography of the Bible to which geographers may make valuable contributions through their teaching and research efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the above then are the subject matters of the Geography of the Bible. It should be noted that these areas of our academic concern need not necessarily share equally our attention, time wise. In fact, the second area, the temporal-spatial aspect of the subject, requires the greatest amount of time and more detail in treatment.

The content of the Geography of the Bible, is pertinent to our profession; it is appropriate in our geography curriculum. The subject is always timely, but the opportunity for its promotion is greater now than ever. As it has been said, the general and the genuine interest in the subject is definitely there. It is the responsibility of the geographers to investigate the subject in depth, to sharpen their competence with keen interest and skill, and to present it to their followers and the general American public with encouragements and in an unequivocal manner.

FOOTNOTES

1. See for example, in Karen Limauro, "The Many Faces of Geography," Research News, Division of Research Development and Administration, University of Michigan, Vol. 28, No. 8 (August 1977), 19pp.

2. While a graduate student at the University of Washington (1963-66), this author defined Geography as "a science of synthesis." The definition did not gain further support. The idea, however, has been well represented recently in Geography: A Modern Synthesis by Peter Haggett (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972). Second edition, 1975.

3. See J. R. Schwendeman, Sr. and J. R. Schwendeman, Jr., Directory of College Geography of the United States, Academic Year 1974-75 (Richmond, Ky.: Eastern Kentucky University, 1975).

4. Geographers have long recognized that religious ideas and organization may play an important role in the way man occupies and shapes the land. See David E. Sopher, Geography of Religion, Foundation of Cultural Geography Series (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. vii.

5. Paul Fickeler, "Fundamental Questions in the Geography of Religions," in Philip L. Wagner and Marvin W. Mikesell, eds., Readings in Cultural Geography (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 94-117.

6. Jonathan J. Lu, Field Work on the Geographic Background of the Bible, unpublished Research Proposal submitted to the Graduate College, the University of Northern Iowa (January 1977), p. 2. The project was carried out in March 1977 in both Jordan and Israel.

7. Denis Baly, "The Lay of the Land," A lecture given at the St. George College in Jerusalem on March 17, 1977.

8. The Bible has been translated into almost all known languages and

dialects of the world today. See For A 1,000 Tongues (American Bible Society).

9. George Adam Smith, The Historical Geography of the Holy Land (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1894).

10. An example of this approach is found in George A. Turner, Historical Geography of the Holy Land (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973). Aharoni's book, however, takes a different approach. Part One of the book takes on a "systematic" approach, and Part Two a chronological arrangement. See Yohanan Aharoni, The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography, translated from the Hebrew by A. F. Rainey (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1967).

11. Denis Baly, The Geography of the Bible, A Study in Historical Geography (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), p. xii.

12. In addition to the above-mentioned, the list of books with geographic interests includes, Atlas of the Biblical World (with A. D. Tushingham as co-author, New York: The World Publishing Co., 1971), The Geography of the Bible, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974); Multitudes in the Valley (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1957), Palestine and the Bible (New York: Associate Press, 1961); and Geographical Companion to the Bible (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1963).

13. Baly, 1957, loc. cit.

14. J. B. Mitchell, Historical Geography (London: The English Universities Press Ltd., 1965), pp. 12-13.

15. Ralph H. Brown, Historical Geography of the United States (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1948); see also J. B. Thompson, The Historical Geography of Europe as cited in Mitchell, op. cit.

16. G. Ernest Wright, Shechem: The Biography of a Biblical City (New

York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1965).

17. Summer drought is a unique characteristic of this "Mediterranean Land." The rainy season in this part of the world is concentrated in winter. In Haifa, for example, 84% of the annual precipitation falls in the three months of December, January, and February. From June to September, there is scarcely any drop of rain. Winters here are rather mild, the heavy rains in the season nonetheless could make one feel miserable. But now, says the writer of the Songs, "the winter is past; the rain is over and gone." It begins a season of love and joy. "Arise," therefore, "my love, my fair one, and come away . . . Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice . . ." (Song of Solomon 2:11-14).

18. For another interpretation on the stretching of the heavens, see Jeffrey Marsh, "Creation According to Cosmology," Commentary (October 1977), pp. 65-66. See also Isaac Asimov, The Collapsing Universe (New York: Walker, 1977).

19. Especially, Biblical Archaeologist (ASOR); The Biblical Archaeology Review (The Biblical Archaeology Society); and the Journal of Religion (formerly, the Biblical World).

20. It has been claimed that Jehovah had promised "the Children" that "every place the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that I have given unto you." (Joshua 1:3). For various reasons, Joshua and "the Children" did not tread "every place" in the "Promised Land" and, as a result, they had to practice "peace coexistence" with the Canaanites, a situation in which I often wish that it could possibly be practiced again in the contemporary world.